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GRIZCODE:

A WEB SERIES ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

FROM THE STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

By

DARIEN WILLIAM GOSTAS

Undergraduate Professional Paper
presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the University Scholar distinction

Davidson Honors College
University of Montana
Missoula, MT

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Approved by:

Andrew Smith, Faculty Mentor
Media Arts Department

ABSTRACT

Gostas, Darien Gostas, B.F.A., May 2016

Filmmaking

GrizCode: A Web Series About The University Of Montana From The Student Perspective

Faculty Mentor: Andrew Smith

The point of this paper is to explore the development, purpose, and challenges of making the web series, *GrizCode*. It is not as scientific, as it is a narrative of what came to be. The goal of *GrizCode* was to paint a picture of what student life is like at the University of Montana, giving tips and life advice while celebrating and parodying what it means to be a “Griz.” It consisted of floating head type interviews of students over a green screen background of animations, with fun upbeat music that would keep the audience engaged and promote a joyful tone. The project became much more intensive overcoming and learning copyright law, and I discovered the show could be used for a much higher purpose than entertainment – it could help stop the decline of enrollment at UM. After careful deliberation, the release date of *GrizCode* was moved to Fall 2016 so that my remaining energy during school could go toward collecting as many interviews as possible. During the summer, the episodes will be edited, the sound refined, and animations will be added to illustrate some of the advice and stories from interviewees. In fall of 2017, based of the number of views that *GrizCode* accumulates in a year, the effects on enrollment may be speculated.

Vision in Preproduction

It started in October. Zachariah, my lovely boyfriend of over a year now, was turning twenty-five years old and for his birthday I took him downtown with a bunch of his close friends. One particular friend I invited was Mercedes Becker, and a friend I hadn't conversed with since freshman year. Mercedes stole all my attention that night. She was incredibly affable, funny, and receptive to the problems I was dealing with senior year. It was her senior year, but being the planner she is, she managed to solve her issues early on in her junior year - it seemed like her senior year was a cakewalk. Me on the other hand, I had issues; the largest being I needed to come up with a plan for a senior project, not only for the honors college but for the media arts department as well.

The birthday party had moved to the bar *PLONK*, and after a couple drinks, Mercedes and I started reminiscing about freshman year. One of the topics that came up was a show on *MTV* (The Music Television Channel) called "Girl Code" - a floating head type documentary show where female comedians are interviewed on general young adult topics, such as roommates, crushes, and boobs. We both loved that show and laughed remembering some of its best moments, and the influence it had on our lives. It helped Mercedes navigate a couple past relationships and it taught me more about girls than any other influence in my life. At one point, we thought, "What if there was a University of Montana version of 'Girl Code? We could call it 'GrizCode,' one word because that's cooler." I digested the idea a little bit, and realized that would make an outstanding senior project and would be so much fun to do. Having a relaxed senior year, Mercedes wanted to co-create it. The next day, we got together and started planning.

When it came to vision, Mercedes and I had different ideas. For me, the show had to come off positive. Not everything had to be positive statements, but if it was too negative, I felt like it wouldn't be enjoyable to watch. Mercedes on the other hand wanted it to be similar to a *Comedy Central* Roast of the University of Montana. We tried to compromise figuring we could balance out the good and bad in the end.

For content, we chose the most basic, general topics regarding student life at UM. These include:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ First Friday ❖ Brewfests and Breweries ❖ Downtown Bars ❖ Parties (Maggot Fest, Disco Bloodbath, etc.) 	<p>Life in the Residence Halls</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Laundry ❖ Roommates ❖ RAs ❖ Bathrooms 	<p>The Great Outdoors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Hiking the “M” ❖ Floating the Clark Fork River ❖ Kim Williams Trail ❖ Hiking the Rattlesnake
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ The Gym ❖ The University Center ❖ The Food Zoo 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Greek Life ❖ Intramural Sports ❖ Football Games 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Cat-Griz ❖ Freshman Year ❖ Curry Health Center
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ The Kaimin ❖ Foresters’ Ball ❖ Sex on and off campus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Campus Parking ❖ Advisors and Professors ❖ Classes and Studying 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Honors College ❖ Mansfield Library ❖ The Oval

In the above chart, each block represents an episode with the topics discussed appearing within that block. (Nine blocks are shown because the tenth episode will consist of outtakes and extra content.) We tried to organize them to be in groups revolving around different themes, but for some we chose two less interesting topics, and threw in a more interesting topic. Depending on the responses we recorded in interviews, some topics may be moved around in editing later. We are also still throwing around the idea of making each topic it’s own episode. Again, depending on what we recorded in interviews, that might be too extensive of an idea to put together.

Aesthetically, we both wanted it to look and feel similar to “Girl Code” but with our own twist and content. “Girl Code” uses green screen in the interviews and portrays backgrounds that look like colorful blueprints of dolls, along with sunglasses, unicorns, and other friendly subjects all designed in the style of Pop Art. For our show, we wanted everything to be UM related. I decided to create a series of traced grizzly bears in different poses for the background, along with my own artist renditions of campus landmarks like Main Hall and the Grizzly Statue.

We wanted to get a broad group of interviewees from all different majors. Each student could even tell us in depth what it's like to be in that major and work with their specific professors. (Later I realized, that was bad idea asking for trouble that wasn't worth the entertainment.) Our goal was to interview between ten and fifty students, and one and ten local comedians because I was part of the Missoula Stand Up community. For students who didn't want to be on camera, we could write down their stories and deliver them anonymously for them. We used Google Docs to write down our jokes for the show and compiled stories from friends.

Mercedes and I daydreamed about "GrizCode" going viral and giving us income or at least some national attention. Because we were addressing a University negatively, and creating a show similar to "Girl Code," we were aware we could be sued and in the end and not make a dime, or even lose money, so we had to ask ourselves if we still wanted to proceed. We thought it over and agreed it would be worth the story and give us something to be passionate about in our last year of college.

Publishing and Copyrights

Mercedes and I both wanted to use YouTube to publish "GrizCode." YouTube is the most widely used free video-sharing network (and I've dreamed of being a YouTube star for years.) Regardless of what demographic is interested, they have access to YouTube. We would publish ten episodes toward the end of the school year and advertise on every popular social media network - that was the initial plan.

Through the struggle of finding students to interview and getting the word out, Mercedes and I started compiling interviews much later than we had hoped. As interviews started coming in, I found myself struggling to find enough digital memory to hold all these interviews as well. I wanted to animate some of the stories that were told on camera, to give them a comedic punch. I tried animating some of it and realized it would take much longer than anticipated. At some point, Mercedes recorded two interviews, but then became busy with her own life so I was left on my own. Running into all these hurdles, and coming to realize that this project could be much bigger than just a senior project, led me to decide not to finish the episodes by the end of the year. That way, I could focus entirely on interviewing as many

students as I could. My plan was to still publish the series on YouTube, but I would release them in the fall, giving me the summer to work on postproduction animations, sound design, color correction, and processing all the footage.

The reason we were late to interviewing students was because we were learning about copyright law. Mercedes and I didn't want to get sued by either *MTV* for being similar to "Girl Code" nor the University of Montana for referencing and critiquing the institution. We spoke to ASUM Legal Services on several accounts and personally, I did over twelve hours of research on copyright law so I was familiar. We learned many guidelines that we would have to follow and be cautious about, but our project was still possible. Some of the bigger lessons we learned were: interviewees could say what they wanted on camera because of our constitutional first amendment; nothing on screen could display any kind of logo or copyrighted brand so we could not use any of the University's regalia and interviewees could not wear clothing with any kind of logo; we couldn't use any footage or photography of any campus buildings for commercial use unless it was taken from public ground (Arthur Street); we could use the name "GrizCode" because the university does not own the word "Griz" nor does *MTV* own the word "Code" because of their general use and literal meanings. This research took until late February / early March so we didn't start interviewing until Mid-March.

Interviews

The interview process took me by a little bit of a surprise. For some reason, I thought many people would be excited to interview for *GrizCode* and all the interviewees would be funny, smart, and relatable. This, however, was not the case.

Mercedes and I published a promotional video for *GrizCode* announcing we were looking for students to interview and that this was a unique chance for people to share their university experience in a comedic atmosphere. We informed people how to contact us and waited patiently for emails to flood in. No wave of volunteers came. I found myself having to actively reach out to students and convince them to interview for the series. On Facebook and Instagram, at work and in the classroom, I was reaching out to people to interview. Then, when I had a student who agreed to interview, I had to figure out a way to get a good interview out of them.

“Girl Code” makes interviewing seem so easy. The girls on the show look great, they are comedians for a living so they’re funny and articulate, and their rhetoric transitions between each other seamlessly with how the interviews are cut. I quickly realized this was not my situation. I was interviewing real students from a variety of backgrounds and majors. None of them were paid performers and I ran into issues. Some students were not articulate; some were shaky and nervous on camera; some were mean or aggressive; some were stiff and boring; some looked unkempt. Luckily, I was taking a documentary class at the time so I learned some skills to help interviewees feel comfortable and evoke a performance from them.

I created a to-do list for myself to complete with interviewees before the interview to bring the best performance out of them. The first task on my list was to explain what outcome I wanted from the interview and the logistics of the interview to the best of my ability. This helped them get on the same page so they could consciously and subconsciously tailor their comments to what I wanted. Second, I assured the interviewee that this was a safe place and if they felt uncomfortable about something they said, they could retract it. This helped them relax and not hesitate to digress and speak their mind on topics. Third, I brought up small talk and asked them about classes or their day or their family. Getting them talking about something general with no pressure eased them into the interview conversation topics. Lastly, I tried to make them laugh, whether it was through a joke I had heard recently, or making fun of the interview process itself, or commenting on issues the interviewee shared with me. This was probably the most important step as it established some trust with me as the interviewer and calmed their nerves.

During the interviews, I gave the interviewees my full attention. I was engaged with their responses and responded appropriately to comments. Actively in the moment, I thought of questions that would evoke ideal responses and provoke them (if I could) to speak passionately regarding the topics of conversation. This usually meant me acting as devil’s advocate and asking them questions that went against the side on which they were speaking.

The whole process was very draining because I was standing for every interview behind the camera, and being an introvert, having to engage with someone intently for an entire hour or longer was exhausting. One time, I had six interviews in one day with several of those back-

to-back. If I could go back in time, I would've interviewed people much earlier and recruited more people to help gather interviews.

Sound Design

I own a small AKAI USB compact keyboard and I have taken a couple sound for film classes hear at the University, so I felt pretty confident I could come up with my own beats for the ambience of *GrizCode*. I was wrong.

The show "Girl Code" uses these very simple beats that have a dancing club feel. The beats are laid under the comedian interviews to keep the tempo of the show moving and they are written in keys that keep the audience feeling happy and upbeat. I wanted to use this style in "GrizCode" but found it so much more difficult to create my own beats than anticipated. I would still like to come up with my own beats, but it is no longer a priority. Instead, I went on Apple's *GarageBand* to remix some the domain-free, royalty-free, loops they have for artists to use.

To create the music used in the *GrizCode*'s opening sequence, I viewed and reviewed, over and over, the opening sequence of the first episode of "Girl Code." The way it is compiled, mixed with the soundtrack that accompanies it, is sublime. It sets a tone for the whole show and excites the viewer watching. For "GrizCode," I went through every loop I could on *GarageBand* and put aside any that gave off the same tone of "Girl Code." I wrote and rewrote what I wanted to narrate in the opening sequence until it had the same tone: fun, intriguing, and exciting. (See the "Opening Sequence Narration of *GrizCode*" below.)

Once I had a good list of loops, I remixed them into what is now the opening sequence to "GrizCode." I'm pretty happy with it and I think it turned out even better than I had hoped. It's catchy, and sounds kind of educational, but fun and interesting. For the rest of the show, I took specific loops from the opening sequence and played them under the interviews so the tone and feel of the show stayed congruent.

Opening Sequence Narration of *GrizCode*:

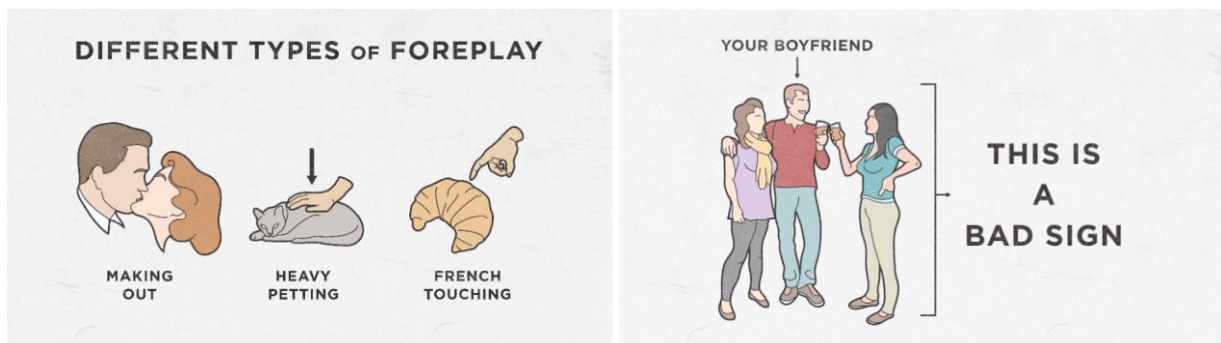
"We all chose UM. Whether you love this University or hate it, we define our college experience. We've all learned lessons, in the classroom and outside it. So let us be your guide,

because know matter where you come from, or what you're studying, we all have one thing in common: we are all Grizzlies!

This is...GrizCode."

Animation Design

"Girl Code" does a phenomenal job with their animations. Instead of trying to describe them, I've attached a couple examples:



The "Girl Code" formula for animating is to provide diagrams for information that doesn't necessarily need a diagram, but would be funny if they were portrayed on screen and in a literal sense of what is being said. For *GrizCode*, I want to reciprocate this style of using block coloring, simple outlines, and eyeless people, displayed in a diagram format with arrows and text.

For the green screen backgrounds, here are a couple examples from "Girl Code:"



As you can see, "Girl Code" continues the style from above but with a little bit more color. It also uses a series of colored dots with a low opacity that fade in and out across the screen. Now, here are a couple screen shots from the rough-cut episode of *GrizCode*:



I wanted to use grizzly bears instead of diagrams but in that same style of “Girl Code.” I am currently using a grey circle that grows in the corner and two bars of grey that slowly fill the screen diagonally for my background animations, as opposed to how “Girl Code” uses the colored dots. I might change this up though. Initially, I liked grey because it works with UM’s colors, but I think adding some more color would be fun. For the tech side of it, I’m using Adobe Illustrator for the initial drawings and importing them into Adobe After Effects to animate them.

Repurpose

The University of Montana has had declining enrollment since 2012 when alleged rape reports were mishandled and botched by the University police. Three years later, Jon Krakauer released a book titled, “MISSOULA: Rape and the Justice System in a College Town.” Due to these events, Missoula is known as the “Rape Capital of America” despite having less than the national average of reported rapes at a state university. In 2011, UM had over 16,000 students enrolled. Now in 2016, that number is less than 14,000. This has caused many devastating effects financially for the university that has lead to budget, program, and faculty cuts campus wide. As a proud “Grizzly,” it hurts my heart to see this university fall apart.

GrizCode was intended for entertainment purposes directed at a demographic of current, future, and past University of Montana students. What became apparent through the interviews though was that it could be used as incredible propaganda for the University. It might even be able to stop UM’s declining enrollment.

As a member of UM Advocates, I have a responsibility to help prospective students see themselves matriculating here. We, as campus tour guides, have the power to give prospective students a positive or negative feeling on campus which is many times a determining factor in

whether a prospective student chooses this University. A campus tour consists of one to maybe forty students, for which a tour guide has an hour to explain to students what it is like here while pointing out landmarks and naming the buildings on campus. It is quite a lot pressure for us.

GrizCode offers much of the same experience one would experience with a tour guide learning about life on campus but offered in a much quicker, easier to consume format that is accessible internationally! With its content and style, it is directed toward the prospective student age group and is easily seen through a Google search of UM. The goal is now that students searching up UM will see a link to *GrizCode* on YouTube, and watch a few videos that will peak their interest in matriculating - as opposed to seeing the hype surrounding UM's rape reputation.

Looking Forward

This is the most extensive project I have ever done. I have close to thirty interviews and hours of footage to process. With editing, animations, and sound to create and perfect, I'm a little intimidated to complete the project. My plan is to release every episode this fall and I am sticking by that deadline. I hope the show goes viral and does so much good for the University of Montana, but if nothing else, it'll be one step closer to increasing our enrollment.

GrizCode will be my legacy from UM. It combines everything I've learned from completing the BFA Filmmaking track. It involves producing, directing, editing, sound design, animating, illustrating, lighting, acting, camera work, staging, and more.

On the off chance that *GrizCode* does go viral, I would love to make a second season for the series on topics such as campus squirrels, the bus system, and alcohol. I think that could be quite fun, entertaining, and educational.

If you are reading this and have questions, suggestions, comments, or are interested in distributing *GrizCode*, please email me at dariengostas@gmail.com. I'm open to all perspectives and opinions in order to make *GrizCode* the best it can be.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project would not have been possible without the help and support from Mercedes Becker. I believe this was the best damn idea we had in college and I feel blessed to have come up with it with you.

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